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Portuguese Studies

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# FROM THE ATLANTIC ISLANDS TO LOWELL, MA

Continuity and Change in the Mill  
City's Portuguese Community



Immigrants arrive in the United States from all corners of the globe. In the 19th century the industrial revolution and immigration dramatically transformed the landscape where the Concord and Merrimack Rivers join. Canals dug, red brick mills built, Lowell was open for business. Thousands of workers poured into the city. By 1900, 17,885 foreign-born Portuguese lived in Massachusetts. Twenty years later 50,000 Portuguese immigrants resided in the Commonwealth, many toiling in cotton and woolen mills in Fall River, New Bedford, Lowell, and Lawrence.



# The Portuguese in Lowell

## Background

The first Portuguese immigrants to the U.S.—from the late eighteenth century to the early 1880s—came mostly from Faial, Pico, Flores, Corvo and São Jorge, and provided crew for American whaling ships. From 1890 to 1920, one million Portuguese emigrated from their homeland, mostly to Brazil, while 160,000 settled in the U.S., many finding their way to New England's burgeoning industrial centers.

Portuguese and all other immigration into the U.S. slowed when Congress enacted a series of restrictive laws in 1917, 1921, and 1924. Passage of the Immigration Act of 1924 (Johnson-Reed Act) made it extremely difficult for newcomers from eastern and southern Europe and other parts of the Americas, Asia, and Africa to enter the U.S. The number of Portuguese immigrants went from as high as 15,000 per year in the 1910s to 325 in 1925; and for the decade of the 1930s, only 3,329 Portuguese immigrants entered.

By George Kenngott's count in *The Record of a City* (1912), a "large, foreign, non-English-speaking population has come to Lowell during the last 25 years; those from southern Europe and Asia have come almost entirely during the last fifteen years." In the early 1900s, 20,000 native-born residents of native-born parents lived in Lowell. Everyone else in the city of some 100,000 had at least one immigrant parent.

Kenngott noted that the 2,500 Portuguese in the city began arriving around 1890, with many new arrivals working in cotton mills. By 1910 they had acquired real estate in the city, with an assessed valuation of about \$200,000. Life was not easy: "...the houses are old and dilapidated. Some of them have holes in the floor and the walls are hardly fit for human habitation and should be torn down," Kenngott observed. "About twenty of the Portuguese have built cottages...and have little plots of ground about neat and attractive homes, which are reminders of their native homes in the beautiful Azores."

## John Falante

About half of those who settled in Lowell in the early twentieth century were from Madeira, while most others were from the Azores (Terceira and Graciosa). John Falante's story is a typical one. In 1920, after a seven-day ocean voyage, 16 year-old Falante arrived from Madeira. Joining an older sister already toiling at the Tremont Mills, he left home "Because my father died, and my mother had seven kids, and there was no way to take care of them. So I had a sister over here in Lowell...she told me I could come over and get a job here and send little by little what I was making.... I got a job in the Tremont Mills. So when you get around 1923, 1924, 1925, the mills started to shut down everything, I had no job. I happened to be lucky enough to go to New Market, New Hampshire, and I got a job there."

In the mid-1920s, Lowell's mills could no longer compete with their Southern counterparts who had newer machines, efficient electric power, cheaper non-union labor, and were closer to the cotton. Between 1920 and 1940, Massachusetts lost 45 percent of its textile jobs. Now, Falante's sister, the magnet that had pulled him to Lowell, bought a farm in Madeira and never returned to the U.S. Like Falante's sister, as work disappeared during the global Great Depression, hundreds of thousands of immigrants to the United States returned home (John Falante Oral History, Center for Lowell History archives).



## Culture in the City

Portuguese religious, social, and cultural institutions flourished in Lowell. Like the Irish before them who'd established St. Patrick's parish in the Acre neighborhood, a Portuguese Catholic parish took root. A few sites were reserved for Catholic religious services until the 1901 purchase of a small church from the Methodists. As more people settled in the Back Central, Chapel Hill, and City Hall neighborhoods, fundraising for a larger building commenced. Laborers built St. Anthony of Padua church on Central Street, which opened in 1907. A community focal point from the start, St. Anthony's remains the city's largest ethnic parish. Religious processions, which were once common on Central, Gorham and Elm streets, are still a part of Portuguese culture in the city today.



Religious parade in Lowell's Back Central neighborhood. Photograph in James Higgins, *Lowell: A Contemporary View*, Mill Town Graphics, 1983.

From 1919 to 1922, a regular column about the Portuguese community titled 'Ecos de Lowell' appeared in *A Alvorada Diária*, a Portuguese-American daily newspaper. Its author, Joaquim M. S. Neves, was almost certainly an immigrant from Madeira. Thereafter, the newspaper, under the name *Diário de Notícias* documented events in the city until it stopped printing in 1973.

Associations and societies in Lowell included the Sociedade Beneficiente de Santo António, founded in 1895, Funchalense Club e Música, the Club Pérola do Atlântico, the Lisbon Social Club, the Club Lusitano, the Sociedade D. Maria Amélia (a woman's club), the Sociedade São João Baptista, and the Sociedade São José. Later, the Portuguese Colonial Band Club, the Portuguese-American Democratic Club, the Portuguese-American Civic League ('The Reds'), and the Portuguese-American Center ('The Blues') thrived. The latter two clubs still function today.

Since the early 1900s, Lowell's Portuguese community has celebrated the Feast of Saint Anthony, the Feast of the Holy Trinity, the Feast of the Our Lady of Loreto, and the Holy Ghost Feast. Established in 1923, the Holy Ghost Society still is headquartered at 65 Village Street.





Backyards, with their grape vine arbors and favas, still define and give character to Portuguese neighborhoods, including Back Central. The Laurencio Family, photograph in James Higgins, *Lowell: A Contemporary View*, Mill Town Graphics, 1983.

Marching bands represented a distinctive Portuguese cultural element in Lowell since the early 1900s. Started in the late 1960s, the Portuguese Band of Lowell or Banda do Espírito Santo de Lowell, still functions. Portuguese-language radio programs filled tenement apartments and households with music and news. Soccer teams formed, beginning with the Young Madeirense Social Club, which played in the Industrial Soccer League in the 1920s, the Lisbon Social Club and the União Portugal Sport Club. Two soccer clubs founded in the 1970s were Lusitanos de Lowell, of the Portuguese-American Center, and Lowell United, of the Portuguese-American Civic League.

## Recent Trends

The first significant upsurge in new Portuguese arrivals came after the 1957-1958 Faial Island volcano eruptions. In response to the eruptions, Firmo Correa, a Portuguese immigrant living in Lowell, wrote to Senator John F. Kennedy (D., MA), asking for his help in allowing residents affected by the volcano entry into the U.S. Kennedy and Senator John O. Pastore (D, RI) drafted the 1958 Azorean Refugee Act, renewed in 1960, which permitted the admission of Azoreans above the low immigration quotas set in 1924. Some 12,000 people came in under the Acts, including to Lowell.

Between 1951 and 1960, 19,588 Portuguese immigrants entered the U.S. Passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965 abolished national origins quotas, making it easier for family reunifications to occur. This so-called “Capelinhos Generation”, the wave of immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s, revitalized Portuguese culture in the United States. In Lowell this included new businesses and soccer clubs and the celebration of new feasts, like the Feast of Our Lady of Fátima. From 1961 to 1970, 76,065, Portuguese immigrants entered the country, indicating the impact of the end of immigration quotas and the increase in family reunifications. From 1971 to 1980, Portuguese immigration totalled 101,710. Thereafter, numbers fell to about 3,500 a year through the 1980s. Forty-five percent of all Portuguese immigration into the U.S. since 1820 took place between 1960 and 1990. In Lowell, recent Portuguese immigrants arrived mostly from the Azores, especially from Graciosa.

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From left to right (top to bottom): Henry Pestana, Beverly Vickery Pestana, Karen Pestana Phelps, David Phelps, Sharen Phelps Pestana, Eric Pestana, Norbert Pestana, Helen Kilman Pestana, Eric Pestana, N. Scott Pestana, Kerri Pestana Morales, and Julie Pestana Zaharatos.

“Once my father got out of the insurance business, he took a fling at the restaurant business. He started a small lunch place, and they called it the Bon Ami Lunch because it was in the French district. He stayed there for some time, then evidently he didn’t make out too good. He moved and catered to the Portuguese and Irish; this time it was Pestana’s Lunch. From there he broke away from Lowell and started to work in New York for a while, but the family stayed here. So then I wound up getting old enough to work, so I was working on a farm in Tewksbury picking rhubarb until I was sixteen years old. From there I went up to Newmarket mills in Lowell. I started right from the beginning, scrubbing floors on Saturdays and Sunday afternoons.”

Henry Pestana quote in Mary Blewett, ed., *The Last Generation: Work and Life in the Textile Mills of Lowell, Massachusetts, 1910 - 1960*, University of Massachusetts Press, 1990.







## Saab Center *for* Portuguese Studies

### The Saab Center for Portuguese Studies

The Saab Center for Portuguese Studies, an academic and cultural unit within the College of Fine Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences (FAHSS), bridges the gap between the campus and the surrounding area by promoting initiatives that enhance the presence and visibility of the Portuguese culture and community. The Center promotes the multidisciplinary study of the language, literature and culture of Portugal, while acknowledging the vast and varied Portuguese-speaking world comprised of over 250 million people in eight countries on four continents and its Diaspora in the United States, in general, and the Merrimack Valley, in particular.

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